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THEATRE CRITICS'

Reviews

1943

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"South Pacific"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
December 30, 1943

'South Pacific' Barely Misses Being an Exciting War Drama

By JOHN CHAPMAN

HOWARD RIGSBY and Dorothy Heyward came tantalizingly close to writing a tingling melodrama in "South Pacific," but this morning's report must be written more with regret than with enthusiasm. The play, which was presented last night at the Cort, is in the comfortless spot of being so good that one keeps wishing it were better.

In their four hands the authors held a splendid scenario—a wartime story as newsy as Bougainville itself, involving Japs, black natives and an American Negro. In the character of the Negro they had the makings of more than just a melodrama; they possessed, but could not quite evoke, a sympathetic and truthful sense of what might go on in the mind of a black American.

In his favor, Producer David Lowe has three or four able players—notably Canada Lee in the main role—and a setting by Boris Aronson which is no less than splendid. The setting is a grass-roofed bamboo house squatting beneath tall palms and a vibrant sky on some imaginary islet off Bougainville.

Act Finale False

On the less favorable side one finds a naggingly slow tempo in a play which should always move fast—and, for a second-act "punch" curtain, a shockingly false and stupidly theatrical scene in which Canada Lee, having just let his two pals go out to fight an army of Japs alone, turns on a phonograph and goes into a frenzy of Harlem hoofing.

"South Pacific" concerns a white marine captain and a Negro merchant sailor from a torpedoed ship, whose raft beaches them on a Jap-held jungle island. The natives accept the Negro, for he is like them; and with delicious laughter he says to the captain, "For once you are the wrong color!"

The captain, being the wrong color, must hide, but the Negro can move freely not only among the natives but also among the Jap enemy. Only, in the beginning, he does not consider the Nips the enemy. Nobody's an enemy. It isn't his war, and, like Colin Glencannon, he is ignoring it.

And well he might ignore it, for he is comfortably housed in Mr. Aronson's lovely shack, and he is warmly caressed by a pretty native girl who has learned college English from missionaries. He has taken the girl from a solemn, gentle, black missionary doctor, and the doctor is accepting his loss with saintly forbearance.

Misses Has First Chance

Other new friends are two bushy-haired native boys and an old tribal chief; so, war or no war, it's a great life for a black man to whom America never gave so much. True, the Japs incessantly jabber orders over a loudspeaker in the village, but their interference is never direct.

There comes a chance when American ships approach for an invasion, to strike a blow on our side by shooting Nips in a gun emplacement. The odds are silly, but the marine captain and the black doctor accept them unhesitatingly and are lost. The Negro, who had argued that it wasn't his war, finds he is now shunned by the natives. His island paradise suddenly becomes a rain-soaked hell, and a new consciousness of American freedom grows within him. When there comes a second chance he redeems himself.

Lee is lusty and sensitive in the central role, although at times last night he fumbled his lines. Handsome Wini Johnson, as the native girl, is rather negative in a negative role. As one of the island boys, young Rudolph Whitaker is sure and right, and Frank Wilson brings comforting repose to the role of a jungle chieftain. Among those least certain or suffering from first-night jumps, was Wendell K. Phillips as the captain.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
December 30, 1943

Misses the Boat

By HOWARD BARNES

AN American Negro has his say about the global conflict in "South Pacific," but it is a stuttering statement. The authors of the new play at the Cort, Howard Rigsby and Dorothy Heyward, have plotted their piece shrewdly. They have quite failed to back it up with dramatic eloquence or implicit meaning. Even though Canada Lee stalks through the scenes as a rebellious black man, who thinks that a Japanese-held atoll is superior to a tenant farm in the deep South, or a Harlem tenement, the offering never comes to grips with its rather fascinating thesis.

• • •

The central idea of the work is honest, provocative and full of pertinent social overtones. A Negro merchant seaman and a white captain are tossed onto an island near Bougainville, after their ship has been torpedoed. The black man finds himself accepted by both natives and Nipponese, while his companion has to go into hiding. For the first time he discovers that his black skin is a badge of distinction, and glories in it. There should be the stuff of a challenging play in this notion. Unfortunately it is smothered in windy speeches, corny stage effects and a hapless anti-climax.

• • •

Perhaps Rigsby and Miss Heyward were so carried away with their theme that they did not bother to dramatize it. Each time that they arrive at a link in their stage narrative which demanded the most subtle skill in forging, they have merely brought Lee downstage to utter long and obvious monologues. None of us, I think, are unaware that the Negro has a considerable chip on his shoulder, and for good reason. "South Pacific," which might have illuminated the problem, merely muddies it in theatrical claptrap. When the black man is finally scorned by his fuzzy-wuzzy brethren on the atoll for not taking up arms against the Japs, the cumulative effect of the production is bizarre and boring.

• • •

Canada Lee has contributed several fine portrayals to stage doings, but his playing of Sam Johnson is not much to his credit. He is properly embittered in the early scenes, when he finds himself happy with South Sea natives and a Japanese garrison and justifies his attitude by remembrance of past wrongs, but he quite fails to resolve the character into a champion of democracy, whatever the color of his skin. Wini Johnson is good as an educated native and so is Louis Sharp. Wendell K. Phillips, in the sole white role in the drama, might have been far better. "South Pacific" might have been far better. It is full of high promise, but it rarely makes good on its provocative premises.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
December 30, 1943

South Pacific Is Amateurish

By BURTON RASCOE

CANADA LEE has a vivid and vibrant personality, and he is one of the most proficient actors in the profession; but not even he (though he is on the stage nearly all the time and dominates it completely) can make South Pacific anything more than a probably well-intentioned but amateurish appeal to the Negro race to forget whatever bitterness it may entertain toward white Americans and join whole-heartedly in the war against the common enmy, the Germans and the Japs.

It is an appeal which is supererogatory to the point of insult to hundreds of thousands of Negroes now in uniform and to other hundreds of thousands of Negroes who are loyal and patriotic American citizens, who are quite as aware as are the authors of South Pacific that the problem of race discrimination cannot be settled overnight by fiat or riot, but involves education, readjustment of social and economic handicaps. These Negroes are working intelligently, hand-in-hand, with progressive whites toward the liberation of underprivileged Negroes from the penalties put upon them because of their color.

But inasmuch as Communist agitators in recent years have been busily fomenting hatreds and dissensions among the Negroes against their "white capitalist exploiters" (that is in the Communist terminology, every white who is not a Communist), it might be a good idea for the OWI to take over production and subsidize its showing, in Negro communities, free of charge or at low admission rates, for whatever value it may have of offsetting the vicious work of Communist agitators in convincing some malcontents among the Negroes that their enemies are not the Germans or the Japs, but white Americans.

If it is objected that this will add to the taxpayers' already burdensome load, I suggest that inasmuch as there is an acute paper shortage the OWI cut its weekly consumption of white paper several thousand tons in distributing bales and bales of stuff to every editor and everybody in Who's Who—stuff which none whom I can discover ever found of any value or can even read.

With the money thus saved on paper, printing and mailing costs the OWI could finance touring companies, without detaching anyone from the federal payroll (which, of course, is unthinkable). All they would have to do would be transfer the jobholders thus relieved to another payroll—that of advance agents, press representatives, stage managers, tour managers and supers in the road companies of South Pacific.

Of course, I don't know what a cast for South Pacific would be like without Canada Lee, because its appeal is pretty elementary even with him. As Sam Johnson, a merchant seaman tossed by a Jap torpedo onto an island in the South Pacific which has been held for two years by the Japs, Mr. Lee is required to be a sex-hungry, very virile and masterful Negro, at whose very sight a pretty native girl (Wini Johnson) who has learned English from missionaries, swoons and capitulates. To a white army captain who has survived the torpedoing with him, he gleefully observes, "Here's where you instead of me, are the wrong color." He gets the girl, quick, taking her away from the educated native doctor who is in love with her but lacking in sex appeal.

Mr. Lee has a long speech in which he says to the white army man (who has saved his life, by the way) that this is a white man's war and he'll have none of it; that if he sides with anybody it will be with the Japs, because they are colored, too. But, by tall tales of his prowess as a prizefighter, marksman and tap dancer and a natural friendliness, he becomes a hero to the natives. But when he fails to join the white officer in a dangerous mission to knock out some Japs, he is shunned by all the natives except the girl, and coming to realize that no man can live alone and without something to believe in, he grabs a gun and goes out to do his bit.

The motivation is "literary" in the worst sense and the action is confusing and often ridiculous; but it might stir some malcontents of unstable emotions in the right direction.

"South Pacific"

NEW YORK POST
December 30, 1943

"South Pacific," Drama of War, Opens at the Cort Theatre

By EARL WILSON
(Pinch-Hitting for Wilella Waldorf)

IT becomes clear today that you can't fight the Japs in the South Pacific very realistically on a stage in W. 48th St.

A cast headed by Canada Lee, the big Negro actor, tried pretty courageously to do it last night at the Cort Theatre. They get 100 per cent for the effort, but "South Pacific" didn't come out very believable, despite a good idea.

Canada Lee plays Sam Johnson, an earthy, sensuous Negro whose principal interest (when he is landed on a Pacific island with a wounded army captain) is a shapely native girl of his own color. He doesn't care especially that the Japs have held the island for two years. The seduction follows almost immediately.

Indeed, he shouts that his native U. S. is made up of "crackers" who never cared much about him, so why should he be interested now in trying to help the Allies recover the island? And so, although a crack rifle shot, he refuses to go out with Capt. Dunlap (Wendell K. Phillips) and Dr. John (Louis Sharp) when the natives get hold of three rifles. The other two are killed trying to assist some Allied landing parties, and Sam Johnson for the first time begins to be shaken somewhat in his conviction that the Allies should leave the island untouched so he and the girl, played by Wini Johnson, can have a paradise there, safe from unfeeling, color-conscious Americans.

Not, however, until a native boy who has withheld the rifles from the Japs is shot by them does he really see that he has a stake in the fight. The Allies' guns are thundering with a new attack on the island, the girl is sobbing that she will never see Sam again, and Sam has the rifle in his hand and is shouting, "Capt. Dunlap, I'm coming!" at the end.

The authors, Howard Rigsby and Dorothy Heyward, have put some good suspense in this play, and some thoughtful speeches. Producer David Lowe, however, seemed overambitious in trying to tell so difficult a story on one stage. For the same reason, Canada Lee at times was fighting too hard to show his own inner battle. Miss Johnson, Rudolph Whitaker, who played the native boy, Daniel; Louis Sharp, and Wendell Phillips carried their parts ably. Lee Strasberg directed the play. He saw to it that there were no Japs on the stage, and the audience instead heard only their threatening voices over the island's public address system. Killing the little boy was their ace villainy.

"SOUTH PACIFIC"

"South Pacific," play by Howard Rigsby and Dorothy Heyward; staged by Lee Strasberg; scenery by Boris Aronson; presented at the Cort Theater Wednesday, December 29, 1943, by David Lowe. The cast:

Sam Johnson.....Canada Lee
Captain Dunlap.....Wendell K. Phillips
Ruth .....Wini Johnson
Daniel .....Rudolph Whitaker
Lliiboi .....Dan Johnson
Dr. John.....Louis Sharp
The Lulual.....Frank Wilson
Japanese Voice.....Kale Deel
Natives.....

Gordon Heath, George Fisher, Ruby Dee
Native Children.....

Ledia Rosa, Gloria Robinson, Emanuel Gillard, James Reason, Clyde Goines

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
December 30, 1943

An Honest Try On A Good Theme

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

I'M afraid it's not possible to call *South Pacific* a good play, which is a great pity. For in intention and integrity, and for that matter in its ability to hold your interest, it belongs in a different world from the slick trash and shoddy cleverness that litter Broadway. Howard Rigsby and Dorothy Heyward have had something to say, and they have tried to say it as honestly as possible. That they have said it clumsily and confusedly at times is to their disadvantage but not their discredit.

South Pacific tells of two Americans, a white captain and a Negro seaman who, after floating four days on a raft, land on a small Jap-held island in the South Pacific. An educated Negro doctor hides the captain; the seaman decides to gamble on the color of his skin and pretend to be a native. He is a bitter, cynical roughneck who in America had been cheated of everything in life because of his race. In his rancor he doesn't care who wins the war. Here, on the island, where he finds a Negro missionary girl to love and natives to be friends with, he feels happy and fulfilled.

When at length Allied ships attempt to take the island, Sam refuses to go with the captain and the doctor and help shoot down, from behind, the Japs who are manning machine guns. The Japs kill the captain and the doctor, and the outraged natives cold shoulder Sam. From a sense of shame and guilt his conscience begins to ache; and when the Japs kill a young native boy he has grown fond of, he is roused to anger and comprehension. He sees at last that no man can stand alone and that no man can stand aside.

• • •

The theme of *South Pacific*—of the individualistic tough guy gradually acquiring a social sense—was, with a considerable difference of accent, also the theme of Hemingway's novel *To Have and Have Not*. It is an important theme that has not yet been handled with sufficient insight and skill. The racial motivation in *South Pacific* is a sound one; the locale is interesting; the general approach is realistic. What *South Pacific* crucially lacks is enough skill in its writing and characterization, and enough dramatic pressure. Sam is made too articulate for what he is; he is also made too easily understandable, too lacking in convincing surprises of character. The symbol gets in the way of the human being. Moreover Sam's articulateness leads the authors into awkward and overemphatic speeches; as a matter of fact, their dialogue in general lacks vitality. And their play, though its sincerity gives it its own kind of drive, is dramatically often pretty limp and prosaic. Such a weakness combined with so unpretty a theme will, I fear, defeat *South Pacific* at the box office. But I think that serious playgoers will find it more rewarding than slicker and emptier plays around town.

As Sam, Canada Lee gives a performance that begins rather weakly but grows better and better, and has real power at its best. As the young native boy, Rudolph Whitaker gives a really beautiful performance that has both lifelikeness and charm. Louis Sharp is properly grave as the doctor and Wendell K. Phillips competent as the captain. As the girl, Wini Johnson does as well as she can with the weakest character in the play. Mr. Strasberg's direction is careful and Boris Aronson's set attractive.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
December 30, 1943

Canada Lee Has Leading Role in 'South Pacific' at the Cort

By ROBERT GARLAND

BELIEVE me, it's going to be tough to tell you in all fairness just why "South Pacific," the new arrival in the 1943-1944 series at the Cort, isn't a more moving melodrama, a more impressive propaganda play, and, when taken by and large, a more meritorious theatrical contrivance than it turned out to be last evening. I, for one, was looking for a knockout, perhaps even a martial "Native Son." No knockout arrived.

Written in collaboration by Howard Rigsby, of whom I have not heard, and Dorothy Heyward, of whom everybody has; staged by Lee Strasberg, justly celebrated; set by Boris Aronson, well-known to one and all, and acted by Canada Lee, "South Pacific" is given every opportunity to become the on-stage triumph it, along with many another first-nighter, expected it to be. But it doesn't manage to come through.

Laid at the present moment on a small island in the South Pacific, the Cort's new contender is, in scene and action, as up-to-date as today's front page. The trouble is, it isn't as dramatic. Looking beyond the blinds of the island's Government Community House, across the lagoon to the gleaming shores of Guadalcanal, something seems always to be happening, or going to happen, just around the corner of the scenery.

Sam Goes Native

Once more Canada Lee portrays a chip-on-shoulder colored man. In "Native Son" his name was Bigger Thomas. In "South Pacific" his name is Sam Johnson. Just how Sam manages to get himself cast ashore, along with a captain of Marines, on an island in the South Pacific, is never made quite clear in the conversation at the Cort. But cast up he is, with Japanese all around him and Guadalcanal just across the bay.

A sullen and belligerent man-out-of-uniform, Sam cares but little for these United States or any part of them. What have they done for him? Nothing! What should he do for them? Nothing! The war we're fighting is not his war. The postwar world for which we're struggling will never be his world. So what the hell? Why not live in peace and happiness beneath the palm trees lining a non-American lagoon?

So Sam goes native! He takes up with a local girl named Ruth, who speaks charming English and lives with a forgiving doctor known as John. While his fellow castaway—the captain of Marines—hides away from the perils of a Jap-infested island, Sam has himself a time. So do Ruth and a boy known as Dan. But, in the end, a Japanese assault brings our unheroic hero to his senses. He, too, goes out, gun in hand, to kill.

Fine Actor

Before, and beneath, a handsome setting by the aforesaid Mr. Aronson, Canada Lee projects the part of the Native-Son-at-Sea with forthright and frequently effective sincerity. Mr. Lee is a forthright and effective actor, as not only Bigger Thomas, but "Brother Mose", "Haiti", the Negro "Macbeth" and "Mamba's Daughter" have long since proven. But I fear Sam Johnson's third dimension eludes him, just as it has eluded the playwrights.

Wini Johnson, out of such song-and-dance fiestas as "Early to Bed", "New Faces" and "Flying Colors", is easy on ear and eye as the fickle South Sea Islander who prefers a deserter to a doctor. Playing her first straight dramatic part, I'll not be surprised if a fine future lies before her. Frank Wilson, he of "All God's Chillun", "Emperor Jones" and "Porgy", makes much of a small assignment known as The Lulual . . .

The trouble with "South Pacific"—and there is trouble with it—is neither the casting, which is excellent, nor the setting, which is handsome, both in rain and shine. David Lowe, the producer, has done everything with and for "South Pacific" that can be done. But I don't believe the authors have. Howard Rigsby and Dorothy Heyward have left much unsaid, much unexplained, much undramatized

"South Pacific"

NEW YORK TIMES
December 30, 1943

THE PLAY IN REVIEW
"South Pacific"

By LEWIS NICHOLS

WITHOUT question, "South Pacific" has many good qualities. In the first place, Howard Rigsby and Dorothy Heyward, who wrote it, have brought to the play a sincerity which is not usual along Broadway, and they are not afraid to use the name for a spade when they see it. In casting the play for the Cort, where it opened last evening, David Lowe has acquired for the leading role one of the best Negro actors, Canada Lee. But judged strictly as an evening in the theatre, it does not entirely live up to its intentions; his performance falls short of the aim. Since the intentions were so good, it is not a little tragic it happens that way.

* * *

The authors are telling of the Negro and the war. Their leading character has been on a torpedoed ship, and is cast up on a South Pacific island along with a white Army captain. The island has been captured by the Japanese; its natives are blacks. After a youth spent in the South of the United States and in the cities of the North, the Negro finds himself happy on the island for the first time in his life. The natives look up to him; the Japanese realize he comes from America but do nothing about it; he falls in love with a girl and wants no part of the war. Finally, at the end, he changes and goes out to do his part.

In the plot lies most of the trouble with "South Pacific." The basic idea of a Negro, shoved around at home and feeling no overpowering urge to help those who had shoved him, is unquestionably excellent. But the motivation of this particular one smacks too much of the theatre. His love for the girl, which is one of the reasons he decides to go after the Japanese, brings the whole thing down to the level of fifty plays a season—a level with which "South Pacific" should not be content. Another of the reasons is the regard in which he had been held by a young native boy who was killed by the Japanese; that, too, is garden-variety plot.

In the leading role, Mr. Lee gives a performance which always holds the interest. He does not play it as well as he did the tortured figure of "Native Son," but the part is more loosely put together. Wini Johnson as the girl is beautiful, but her role often is a distraction from what should be the main part of the play. Wendell K. Phillips is the only white player of the cast, in the part of the Army captain; a young boy, Rudolph Whitaker, obviously will grow up to displace both Mr. Lee and Paul Robeson as leading actors of the Negro race. In directing, Lee Strasberg has allowed some of the material to drift over to the side of mumbo-jumbo; Boris Aronson has contributed a lush South Pacific setting. "South Pacific" deserves credit for taking up a real theme; the regret is that it did not finish the job more successfully.

NEW YORK SUN
December 30, 1943

'South Pacific,' Presented at the Cort, is Diffuse, Slow, Atmospheric

By WARD MOREHOUSE

"SOUTH PACIFIC" is a play that brings jungle war of far-away Jap-infested islands to Broadway's doorstep. David Lowe presents it at the Cort and Canada Lee plays it with all his might, but it never becomes the drama the authors hoped to write and thought they did. It's a piece that probably comes through better in the reading than in the playing.

The atmosphere is there, all right; the play just isn't. You get the feel of the canopying jungle and the denseness of the underbrush. You listen for the whisper of the unseen enemy's slithering feet; you hear the muted beat of the natives' tom-toms and the patter of the ceaseless rain. Atmosphere and memories of things gone by . . . "Aloma of the South Seas," "White Cargo," "Point Valaine"—and even "Rain" itself. But as a play, and as done last evening in the first performance at the Cort, "South Pacific" misses. It is diffuse and slow-going.

There are undertones of "The Emperor Jones" in the groping, swaggering and at times demoniacal character of Sam Johnson, Georgia-born Negro, erstwhile dancer and prizefighter, who has been pushed around all his life. He has always felt himself persecuted by the white race. As a wartime seaman in the Pacific he is torpedoed and, aboard a raft, washed ashore on a small, Jap-occupied island. There he finds his woman, a native. The Japs treat him royally and feast him on roasted pig. His thatched hut becomes a jungle paradise, and he walks out on the war. What did the Japs ever do to him and why should he fight for freedom? What freedom, and what did America ever give him?

Sam's companion aboard the raft, a U. S. captain, and the island's Negro native doctor, who has come to the aid of both, take up arms against the Japs as Sam renounces cause and country. The doctor and captain are hanged. A heroic native boy is slaughtered. The natives become hostile to Sam, his own woman turns against him and he is a trapped, cringing and tortured man before he is finally redeemed.

All characters in "South Pacific" are Negroes except Capt. Dunlap, played by Wendell K. Phillips. The voices of the Japs, their hideous chants and warnings via the loud-speaker, are heard throughout the play but not once does a Jap appear. You always feel their leering presence just outside the bamboo. I wish that the authors, Howard Rigsby and Dorothy Heyward, had brought a few of them into the action with appropriate results. I wish, too, that Mr. Rigsby and Miss Heyward could have made more skillful use of their material and their story of the blustering, abject, and finally heroic, Sam Johnson, from the streets of New York, who finds his own Tondeleyo and reaches out for peace of soul on a war-ravaged Pacific island.

Canada Lee is often an eloquent actor in this play's all-important role. Boris Aronson has done a fine job with the setting. The production has been supervised by W. Horace Schmidlapp. The staging is by Lee Strasberg . . . "South Pacific" is long drawn out. The authors have written of their own far Pacific Emperor Jones with real sincerity, but they haven't written a good play. But as screen material it should be great.

"Doctors Disagree"

NEW YORK SUN
December 29, 1943

Rose Franken's 'Doctors Disagree,' Presented at Bijou, Is Slight, Well Acted

By WARD MOREHOUSE

THAT cozy bandbox of a theater called the Bijou came again into the service of the drama last evening, giving shelter to its second play since its rejuvenation, and bringing to the total of two the plays by Rose Franken now running on Broadway. This new one, "Doctors Disagree," is on the slight side—flimsy, really, but interesting for most of the way and exceptionally well acted.

Rose Franken has the trick of getting good performances out of actors. Either that or they have a way of responding to her direction and getting more out of their roles than there seems to have been written into them. There are several such performances in "Doctors Disagree," which is a small play and one fitted snugly beneath the Bijou's proscenium.

"Doctors Disagree" isn't a play that Miss Franken breathlessly finished night before last. Nor is it one that she completed only a month ago. No, it is an overhauling job on a script of some seasons back, written before she had achieved a measure of fame with "Another Language" and "Claudia," and now she and her husband, William Brown Meloney, encouraged by the showing of "Outrageous Fortune" in Forty-eighth street, have brought it into the Bijou.

In "Doctors Disagree" Miss Franken writes of love and ethics of people in the medical profession, of the problems of women surgeons and the prejudices against them. She writes specifically of Dr. Lathrop, a neurologist and the brilliant, careerminded woman he is seeking to marry. There comes the necessity for an emergency brain operation on a child, whose chances of recovery are but one in a hundred. There is bitter conflict on the diagnosis in a consultation of three, with the woman surgeon taking a stand against an eminent man of medicine. She accepts his challenge, performs the operation, and it is successful. Her confidence in her skill is thus bolstered, but she is also convinced that she does not want to go her way alone. She will take marriage along with career.

It's an obvious conclusion to a little play to which you listen all the way, and which has to its credit skillful direction, first rate acting and neat settings by John Root. The play is spread thinly over its three acts and there are many times when it is at a standstill; but generally the minor characters strive and somehow manage to come to the rescue. When such striving is left to the nasal and raucous and talented Ann Thomas it's all right with everybody. Miss Thomas is getting her medical training this season, all right. She steps into "Doctors Disagree" after a preliminary course in Elmer Rice's "A New Life."

There are excellent performances by Barbara O'Neil, Phil Ober and Judson Laire, all playing doctors and giving believability to their characterizations. Eda Heinemann is around to give her own special comical ways to the part of a faithful but caustic servant.

Nothing to set us to cheering, this "Doctors Disagree." Nothing to cause a great stir in either theatrical or medical circles, but it provides further proof that Miss Franken writes fluent dialogue, directs with preception, and is quite a handy person to have around. Being industrious as well as restless, I doubt greatly if she will be satisfied with only two plays on Broadway. Avery Hopwood once had four running simultaneously, didn't he?

And there was also a man named Fitch. His total was five.

"Doctors Disagree"

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
December 29, 1943

Women in White

By HOWARD BARNES

ROSE FRANKEN observes human experience from the viewpoint of a popular women's magazine in her latest play. "Doctors Disagree" merely celebrates the travails and triumphs of a hen medico as she squares her professional career with her romantic yearnings. It has no such provocative thesis as the author's earlier drama of this season, "Outrageous Fortune." On the other hand, it is cleverly contrived, lucid and well acted. It should enjoy a gala matinee business.

* * *

There is no point in the Bijou Theater proceedings when one can have the slightest question about the next turn in the plot. Whether the lady doctor is violating medical ethics and saving a child's life by a bit of brilliant surgery, or is alternately repulsing and accepting the very proper advances of a male colleague, she is cut to an accepted pattern in an accepted American legend. The surrounding characters fit into the doings perfectly. Miss Franken did not strain her imagination on this drama. To her credit, she has written glibly and at times eloquently.

* * *

The dialogue in "Doctors Disagree" is a great deal better than the dramatic construction, as it is in "Outrageous Fortune." There is a rather absorbing scene in the second act, in which the female physician tells off her condescending brothers in the art of healing. The comic asides come through with considerable bite on occasion and the general effect is one of literate and agreeable dramatic invention. If there is far less invention than skillful verbal embroidery, that does not keep the show from being more than moderately diverting.

* * *

The acting illustrates the fable tastefully. Barbara O'Neill is at once brave and appealing as the doctor who has to overcome a prejudice against her sex, before she is able to demonstrate her professional acumen. Philip Ober plays the suitor, who loves her for herself and then for her medical talents, with proper restraint, and Judson Laire does a good job with the part of the reactionary surgeon, who has to admit finally that a woman can wield a scalpel as well as a man. Then there are Dolly Haas and John Ireland, as the parents of a dying child, brought to their senses by the crisis and Ann Thomas, giving a fine account of herself as a brash nurse. "Doctors Disagree" is a familiar compound of theatrical come-ons, but it is quite palatable.

'DOCTORS DISAGREE'

Play by Rose Franken and staging by Miss Franken; settings by John Root; presented at the Bijou Theater Tuesday, December 28, 1943, by William Brown Meloney, with Buford Armitage and Peter Davis as associates in production. The cast:

Celia	Eda Heinemann
Dr. Margaret Ferris	Barbara O'Neil
Mrs. Deane	Dolly Haas
Pete	Jack Willett
Dr. William Lathrop	Philip Ober
Laura	Ethel Intropidi
Dr. Stanley Bates	Judson Laire
Miss Kelly	Ann Thomas
Mr. Deane	John Ireland

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
December 29, 1943

New Rose Franken Play Is the Story of an Attractive Lady Surgeon

By ROBERT GARLAND

AFTER several chastisements in the columns of the public press, I am still of the opinion that a good play—a really good play—should be all about one thing. "Doctors Disagree," the new Rose Franken play which arrived last evening at the Bijou Theatre, is all about one thing. In consequence, I find it superior to the same author's "Outrageous Fortune," successfully current at the 48th Street.

What is the one thing "Doctors Disagree" is all about? The one thing "Doctors Disagree" is all about is the simple, timely and direct question: Is the female of the doctorial species less deadly to her patients than the male? For three acts and four scenes, Miss Franken argues it out up on the Bijou's stage. In the end, Rose Franken wins.

According to the author of "Doctors Disagree," a lady surgeon—a Dr. Margaret Ferris, Miss Franken's heroine — takes more chances and loses less patients than a gentleman surgeon does. The dramatist is pretty sure about her facts. Maybe she's right. Maybe she's wrong. But I'll still take my chances with old Doctor Foster, the guy who went to Gloucester, in spite of a shower of rain.

Women in White

From what I read in the papers, "Doctors Disagree" has been on Rose Franken's mind for practically a decade. Then, in 1940, it was printed as a book entitled "When Doctors Disagree." Before then—how much before my informers do not inform me—it was "Women in White," a serial in The Ladies Home Journal. Now it is a play, the second of the author's two on view on Broadway.

The story concerns a lady surgeon who, full of ambition and *l'amour*, moves her office from the West Side to the East, keeping her heart in the possession of Dr. William Lathrop. Dr. Lathrop is a persistent West Sider, a self-righteous medico who believes in himself, the superiority of all other Men in White, and the vulnerability of all women who think their place is in the operating room rather than in the home.

There's an operation on a sheet-covered Bobby who, thanks to Dr. Margaret Ferris—and no great thanks, if I know my world-that-is-to-be—will live to know the civilization that is to follow Hitler.

It's an operation so femininely successful that it not only saves the life of the besheeted Bobby, but which, after no little onstage lovey-doveing, brings the She and He physician together.

Notice the O'Neil

Rose Franken's new cast is, for the most part excellent. Eda Heinemann, a favorite with this section of this paper, has some of the funniest lines of Rose Franken's consistently witty dialogue. Owing to her atrocious enunciation, the better part of it fails to get across at the Bijou. A veteran of "Love 'Em and Leave 'Em," "Chicago," "My Sister Eileen," "Autumn Crocus" and "Ah Wilderness," she really should know better. But she doesn't!

Barbara O'Neil, as the operating heroine, is delightful as Dr. Margaret Ferris, the not-too- maidenly medico who can't make up her mind. If Cheryl Crawford and Jack Wildberg don't object to my unprofessional busy-bodying, and if Miss O'Neil can sing, they might do a whole lot worse than consider Barbara as the answer to a road-comedy goddess for "One Touch of Venus."

Philip Ober, as the male doctor of the species who, even if you don't ask me, is more on the take-me-for-granted side than such a none-too-rising young physician has any right to be, is even better than he should be. His is a smug and, to repeat, self-righteous role, and smugness and self-righteousness are a couple of masculine qualities difficult to make attractive on the stage.

Of Rose Franken's two plays on Broadway, "Doctors Disagree" is the better. With foresight and brilliant dialogue, it knows exactly where it's heading. This, even in the theatre, seems like a good idea.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
December 29, 1943

Old Concoctions Only in Doctors Disagree

By BURTON RASCOE

VERY early in the first act of Doctors Disagree, a new play by Rose Franken, which opened at the Bijou last night, Philip Ober had proposed marriage to Barbara O'Neil; she had turned him down with a counterproposal that they live as the saying is, in sin (her reasons being that she was determined to make a career for herself in surgery and inasmuch as he was a famous neurologist who didn't believe in medicine as a career for women, she believed marriage would be bad for both of them); and he (with almost impersonal professional decisiveness) had quickly diagnosed her counterproposal as erroneous and no-go, because she was "not that kind of a woman."

For an uncomfortable while that seemed to be that. But it was only 9:45 and not time for the audience to go yet, so Miss Franken trotted out what is known in the book trade as Abraham Lincoln's doctor's dog. But almost literally. We got all these theatrical gags seriatim:

1. A termagant of a housekeeper—with a heart of gold, of course, who berates, criticizes and disputes with her mistress, whom she nevertheless adores but whose work—that of a surgeon—she disapproves of.

2. A little boy with a dog whose leg is broken. Setting the dog's leg is the only case Dr. Margaret Ferris has had since she moved out of the perambulator section of town and hung out her shingle at a "fashionable East Side address."

We've Met Before

3. A distracted mother of a very ill 6-year old child, who is estranged from her rich young husband, who is described by the nurse, before he appears, as looking like Abraham Lincoln (probably to the great embarrassment of John Ireland who has to play the part and doesn't even look like Raymond Massey). The cause of the estrangement is a little matter of a love affair which the young mother (portrayed by Dolly Haas in such a way—tremolo voice, mannerisms, makeup, hair-do and looks—that you have the curious illusion, at first, that Elizabeth Bergner, having shed a few years, has strayed over from The Two Mrs. Carrolls for the evening) has been most calmly having with the famous fraud, Dr. Stanley Bates (played by Judson Laire as though he were under the delusion that he is Louis Calhern).

4. A child's nursemaid who wrings her hands and says she can't bear to have the child die, because she loves him as if he were her own son.

5. A hard-boiled, slangy, wise-cracking but very efficient nurse, who, though given to snooping and gossip, also has a heart of gold. She provides the comedy relief; and a great relief it is, because the girl who plays it is the inimitable Ann Thomas.

6. Two meals, with real food, eaten on the stage. (They are eating almost as many meals on stage as they are having pregnancies in plays this year).

Empty Intellectuality

7. A dummy child, heavily swathed, is wheeled into an operating room; and a live child, eyes bright but heavily chalked to make him look very pale, is wheeled out of the operating room, showing that the operation was a success.

After you have mixed up these theatrical "gags," what have you? A piece of artificiality which starts out by being a Lucy Stone League argument and ends up by being an obvious and unthrilling boy-loves-girl story.

Dr. Mary Withington and other women proved in practice 40 years ago that women make just as good physaicians and surgeons as men; and the Lucy Stone matter was settled in 1920 by the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. So the intellectual content of Miss Franken's play is about as exciting as the news that Queen Anne is dead.

And, after a thrilling announcement by the villian (later redeemed) at the second act curtain that Miss O'Neil and not himself will perform the operation, Miss Franken makes the third act an anticlimax by doing the obvious—making the operation a successful one. There would have been some drama if Miss O'Neil's operation had failed.